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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine if men and women in public relations jobs differed on the extent to which they performed each of four roles. Based upon the conceptual models found in a wide range of literature on consulting, the four roles used in the study were: (1) expert prescriber, in which the practitioner operates as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions; (2) communication technician, in which the practitioner provides the organization or client with the specialized skills needed to carry out public relations programs; (3) communication facilitator, in which the practitioner acts as a sensitive "go-between" or information broker; and (4) problem-solving process facilitator, in which the practitioner, as a member of the management team, collaborates with others throughout the organization to define and solve problems. A sample of 458 members of the Public Relations Society of America (72% men and 28% women) completed a 28-item survey form about the roles they played. The findings showed that men and women differed significantly on the four roles measured. Women tended to be in the limited role of communication technician, while males tended to play a combination of the other three roles. (FL)

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Public Relations Division

A COMPARISON OF ROLES PLAYED BY MEN AND WOMEN IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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A COMPARISON OF ROLES PLAYED BY MEN AND WOMEN IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

In 1968, Rea W. Smith wrote "Women in Public Relations: What They Have Achieved," citing many successful female practitioners.[1] Twelve years later her choices appear to have withstood the test of time. For example, Betsy Ann Plank, now assistant vice president of Illinois Bell Telephone Company, Chicago, in 1973 became the only woman to serve as national president of the Public Relations Society of America.

Smith identified Dr. Dorothy Gregg, then at United States Steel Corporation, as an example of the women holding "top positions where one would expect to find a man." Dr. Gregg has since become corporate vice president of communications at Celanese Corporation, New York, and is president of the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education.

Rea Smith herself is a success story among women in public relations. At the time she wrote the article, she was assistant to PRSA's executive director. She went on to become executive vice president of PRSA and is now executive director of the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education.

These are only three of many women of achievement in public relations who illustrate the accuracy of Smith's 1968 prophesy that "this record is prologue to what young women can expect from a public relations career."

Membership changes in the major professional society, PRSA, also indicate the inroads women have made into this traditionally-male bastion of professional endeavor. At the time Smith wrote her article, only one *in* every ten members was female. The ratio was one *in* every seven in 1975 when Sondra Gorney

concluded that "the walls of the traditional 'man's world' have not tumbled yet."[2] In her article, "Status of Women in Public Relations," Gorney reported statistics showing great differences in salaries for male and female practitioners. She also reported survey findings of "the preference for male employees, the restrictions of opportunity to 'women's interest' areas of assignment, and starting salaries substantially lower than salaries for men who have had equal preparation."

The latest figures available from PRSA show that one of every four members is a woman (27 percent). Enrollments in public relations sequences nationwide in 1979 suggest what the future holds: 67 percent of all students were women![3]

While the PRSA membership increases and the many success stories of women in public relations indicate progress, a national survey of PRSA members during the summer of 1979 yielded evidence that women in public relations play different roles than their male counterparts.

Public Relations Roles

The role concepts measured were first conceived and used by Broom and Smith in a test of how different role behaviors affect client/employer views of the practitioner and of task accomplishment.[4] Based upon the conceptual models found in a wide range of literature on consulting, the four roles used in this study were:

Expert prescriber. In this role, the practitioner operates as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions. The client, or management, is often content to leave public relations in the hands of the "expert" and to assume a relatively passive role. The practitioner researches and defines the problem, develops the program and takes major responsibility for its implementation.

Communication technician. Practitioners operating in this role provide their organization or client the specialized skills needed to carry out public relations programs. As their job descriptions indicate, these practitioners are typically hired on the basis of their communication and journalistic skills--writing, editing and working with the media. Rather than being part of the management team, practitioners in this role are primarily concerned with preparing and producing communication materials for the public relations effort.

Communication facilitator. This role casts the practitioner as a sensitive "go-between" or information broker. The practitioner serves as a liaison, interpreter and mediator between the organization and its publics. The emphasis in on maintaining a continuous flow of two-way communication. Another major concern is with removing barriers to the exchange of information to keep the channels of communication open.

Problem-solving process facilitator. As members of the management team, practitioners operating in this role collaborate with others throughout the organization to define and solve problems. The public relations practitioner helps guide other managers and the organization through a rational problem-solving process that may involve all parts of the organization in the public relations planning and programming process. Likewise, the practitioner maintains a high level of management involvement in implementing all phases of the program.

An individual practitioner likely plays some or all of these roles to varying degrees, but role research shows that over time a dominant pattern of behavior emerges as role incumbents go about their day-to-day work and dealings with others in the work situation.[5]

The objectives of this study were (1) to determine if men and women in public relations differ on the extent to which they play each of the four roles, and (2) to determine if men and women differ with respect to their dominant public relations roles.

Methods

A systematic sample of 815 public relations practitioners was drawn from the then current PRSA membership list (every tenth name, after a random start, selected from the computer-generated mailing labels for domestic members). Of the 480 returns, 458 questionnaires contained complete responses to the role items (56 percent of the original sample). Eight respondents did not indicate their sex; leaving a sample containing almost the same percentages of males and females as the PRSA membership--72 percent males and 28 percent females.

The items used to measure the four roles were developed in collaboration with and pretested on practitioners in Madison, Wisconsin.[6] The items were further refined after a workshop administration of the questionnaire at the 1978 Midwest Public Relations Conference in Madison. Another pretest with a national sample of PRSA members yielded only minor wording changes in the 28 role items included in the July, 1979, mailing to PRSA members.

Seven items were used to measure each of the roles. Reliability coefficient alphas for the role measures ranged from .79 to .93--expert prescriber, .93; communication technician, .84; communication facilitator, .79; and problem-solving process facilitator, .90.

Findings

Role differences. As expected, the 458 respondents indicated that they played all four roles to varying degrees. The expert prescriber role topped the ratings for the total sample, followed by problem-solving process facilitator in a distant second. Communication technician and communication facilitator virtually tied for third and fourth.

Women in the sample were younger and had fewer years of full-time public relations experience than male respondents. To control for these two alternative explanations for differences found in the roles played, adjusted role means were computed by entering age and years of experience as covariates in the multiple classification analyses.[7] The adjusted means in Table 1 indicate significant differences between men and women on all four roles.

Table 1. Public Relations Roles of Men and Women, Controlling for Age and Years of Experience

Roles	Grand Means (n=458)	Adjusted Means Male (n=323)	Adjusted Means Female (n=123)	F*	Significance of F
Expert Prescriber	5.41	5.53	5.11	19.06	.000
Communication Technician	4.69	4.58	4.98	12.94	.000
Communication Facilitator	4.68	4.74	4.52	7.95	.005
Problem-Solving Facilitator	4.96	5.06	4.70	15.98	.000

*Multiple Classification Analysis with age and years of experience in public relations as covariates.

Whereas both rated the expert prescriber role highest, women rated communication technician a close second. Men rated communication technician fourth. Men put the problem-solving process facilitator role second; women rated this role third. Communication process facilitator--third for men--rated fourth on the women's role profile. Mean ratings for women were lower than those for men on all but the communication technician role.

Further analysis showed that those who gave themselves high scores on the communication technician role also tended to rate themselves relatively low on the other three roles (see Table 2). The communication technician role did not correlate highly with any of the other roles, suggesting that this role is somewhat independent of the others. On the other hand, high correlations among expert prescriber, communication process facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator measures suggest that they tend to be played by the same people.

Table 2. Correlations Among Roles

	Expert Prescriber	Communication Technician	Communication Facilitator
Communication Technician	.18		
Communication Facilitator	.73	.24	
Problem-Solving Facilitator	.84	.12	.78

Even though the measures represented four conceptually different roles, these data show that public relations practitioners see themselves in only two role models: some see themselves playing almost exclusively the communication technician role, while others play a combination of the other three roles.

Dominant roles. The dominant role for each practitioner was determined by comparing the mean scores for the four sets of role measures. Eight respondents did not indicate their sex and 33 scored two or three roles equally, leaving 417 who

rated themselves as playing one role to a greater extent than the other three.

Fifty-eight percent of the men saw themselves primarily in the expert prescriber role, while only 34 percent of the women scored this role as dominant. Fifty-one percent of the women reported the communication technician as their dominant role. By contrast, only 21 percent of the men rated the communication technician role as their dominant role. The differences in these two roles account for the significant difference in the distributions of dominant roles for men and women in Table 3.

Table 3. Dominant Roles by Sex

	Men (n=300)	Women (n=117)
Expert Prescriber	58%	34%
Communication Technician	21	51
Communication Facilitator	5	4
Problem-Solving Facilitator	16	11

(χ^2=36.7, d.f.=3, p> .001)

Summary and Discussion

The data show that men and women in public relations differ significantly on the extent to which they play the four roles measured in this study. The difference in role profiles for men and women was not accounted for by the differences in age and years of experience. These findings also indicate that practitioners tend to operate in either the communication technician role, or in a role that combines the expert prescriber, communication facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator roles.

About half of the women see themselves operating primarily in the communication technician role, while more than half of the men report the expert prescriber role as their dominant role. It appears that even though both men and women are hired

initially for their communication and journalistic skills, women tend to stay in the communication technician role to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Four out of every five men in PRSA have expanded their roles to that of public relations experts and facilitators of communication and problem-solving. On the other hand, only half of the women participate in these management-level public relations counseling and problem-solving functions as part of their primary roles.

Important questions remain about why men and women play different roles in public relations. Differences in professional orientations do not explain the role differences: a recent study found that female practitioners scored higher than male practitioners on the McLeod-Hawley measures of professionalization.[8] Is it something about the employment situations, something about the practitioners themselves, or aspects of both that account for the role differences? The explanations will not emerge from polemic argument, but may be found through systematic study.

Even though this study did not answer these questions, it helps define the situation more objectively and provides a benchmark for measuring changes in the roles public relations men and women play during the 1980's.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Rea W. Smith, "Women in Public Relations," Public Relations Journal, Vol. 24, No. 10 (October 1968), pp. 26, 27 and 29.

[2] Sondra K. Gorney, "Status of Women in Public Relations," Public Relations Journal, Vol. 31, No. 5 (May 1975), pp. 10-13.

[3] Paul V. Peterson, "J-School Enrollments Reach Record 71,594," Journalism Educator, Vol. 34, No. 4 (January 1980), p. 4.

[4] Glen M. Broom and George D. Smith, "Testing the Practitioner's Impact on Clients," Public Relations Review, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 1979), pp. 47-59.

[5] Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1978), pp. 187-93.

[6] The original set of role items were developed as part of a graduate seminar in public relations research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[7] Norman H. Nie, et al., Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), pp. 409-22.

[8] Rose Lyn Jacob, "Public Relations Practitioners: Gender as a Predictor of Professional Orientation" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979).